



Rosa mundi



A Rosarium for Serbia

Radoslav Petrović

There is no serious tradition in Serbia where roses are concerned; everything dates for the most part to the 1950s. At that time, realizing that roses could be a lucrative business, some people decided to grow varieties that were then commercially popular. Naturally, Hybrid Teas were most sought after, so they were represented in great numbers in the nurseries established during the period. The situation remained unchanged until today. I, however, have been trying for a long time to acquaint others with the glorious beauty and graciousness of old garden roses. And I am happy to say that as time goes by, more and more people visit my garden and sincerely admire my roses.

My garden is located 23 kilometers from Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, in a small town called Vrčin, at the foot of Mt. Avala. Surrounded by beautiful landscape with many forests and fields, the area practically begged for a vast rose garden. My collection of 1,200 varieties of mostly old garden roses covers a very limited space. This means that most varieties are represented by a single plant. The



space is small, but the love invested is immeasurable. And the collection is growing: a 2-acre piece of land nearby will be able to hold additional old rose varieties in the future.

It all started in 1994 when I moved from the city of Belgrade to try to realize my dream. I finally had a chance to live surrounded by nature, breathe clean air, and have vast spaces around me. My love for roses dated as far back as I can remember, but my discovery of old garden roses was something entirely new and overwhelming. Little by little, they kept arriving in my garden. First came LOUISE ODIER, unbelievably rich in blooms and in our climate, extremely vigorous. She was followed

by FERDINAND PICHARD, CAMAIEUX, BARON GIROD DE L'AIN, CLIMBING SOUVENIR DE LA MALMAISON, and BOURBON QUEEN. In the beginning, I used to find roses with many petals much more interesting than others until SINGLE CHERRY swept me off my feet with her magical presence, color, and fragrance. In my opinion, the bloom form is the most important aspect of the rose, then comes fragrance, and finally, color. Of course, the form of the bush is equally significant.

My quest for roses did not go smoothly. Bringing rare and valuable plants into the country was always (and still is) hard work. Bureaucracy never stops to take a breath, so every time a rose was to enter Serbia, I encountered numerous problems. Most often, the customs employees expressed lack of understanding: "Why do you need these roses?" or "You are planning to sell them!"

This, of course, was not true. From the very beginning, my intent was to simply enjoy the endless beauty of the plants. Each time I would lay my eyes on a variety I did not know, my excitement would rise. "Oh, God," I would think, "You

must have had such fun making this one. You created something so thoroughly refined and exceptional in every aspect, and then you wove in the threads of fragrances so beautiful that they linger in the air, enchanting anyone lucky enough to be near.” Border inspectors, stern and serious, would shatter my daydreaming: “You will introduce diseases from all over the world into the country; you’ll infect our entire local plant life!”

This battle continues. The law says one thing, then another; sometimes the authorities fail to read the paragraphs all the way through and my parcels end up “returned to sender” and I feel like Sisyphus, always on the brink of obtaining something new when things fall through at the last moment and I have to start over.

At one point I realized that I should start selling roses. The money I made would enable me to keep collecting new varieties, while at the same time I could show others what made me so happy about the roses. I try to explain the superior beauty of an old rose, even though her bloom period is short compared to that of a Hybrid Tea. Fragrance is another issue. People must understand that if their roses have no fragrance, they are robbed of many beautiful moments.

I often wonder, “Do people realize what jewels I am bringing to them?” Our time on this planet is short, but the majestic rose will remain much, much



ABOVE: “Old Fair,” a mystery Gallica from Serbia.
Photos pages 22 to 27 by Radoslav Petrović.





longer. In one hundred or two hundred years, someone else will be enjoying nature's never-ending play and blooms that make us sigh, drunk with their fragrance. If old garden roses survived this long, for what must be just a fraction of eternity, I am certain that they will go on forever.

When I return to my imaginative world, the eternal dilemmas come back to haunt me: where to create a rosarium, and when to stop? As with so many complex ideas, this one too requires serious funds. Should I build it on 2 or 5 hectares of land, or maybe even more? How big should the collection be? And is there ever going to be an end? I always seem to be finding interesting plants.

Wherever I go, I observe roses and ask myself if very old varieties can be found here in Serbia, how old might they be? One day, something caught my attention. In an old part of Belgrade, I saw a plant that reminded me of a Gallica rose. I asked the old lady who lived in the building if she knew the name of the rose. She replied that she did not, but remembered that the rose had been there since she was a little girl at least sixty years ago. Naturally, I took cuttings and propagated the rose immediately. I now have three, named "OLD FAIR," in my garden.

Rare roses always display a special delicacy. I fail to find enjoyment in the purchase of newer varieties, current hit roses, roses of the year, and the like. It is too easy: you can buy them in any nursery and have as many as you wish. There is no better feeling than to discover a rose that is almost extinct, knowing that *you* are the person who will do everything possible to keep it from disappearing from the face of the Earth. On the contrary, you are trying to multiply it and spread it around so that others may enjoy its charms.

Many old roses disappeared during the last one hundred years, some due to human negligence, some because of climate changes. Serbia's climate is very unusual. Even though summers can be extremely hot and winters unexpectedly cold, the fact remains that roses seem to withstand these perils with commendable success. Having observed them in different parts of the country, I have concluded that they are usually quite strong and healthy.

I kept all this in mind when I decided one day to create a rosarium in Serbia, a place where the roses of yesteryear could intermingle with the roses of today, where times past are remembered and older values are never to be forgotten. When I finally fully realize my dream, planet Earth shall have another beautiful spot where everyone will be able to find their proper place. People shall walk in the company of roses, and roses, like a true family, will live in harmony together.

RADOSLAV PETROVIĆ is the owner of Petrović Roses, the only nursery in Serbia and Montenegro that grows and sells rare old roses. Next year his nursery will offer 7,000 bare-root and about 4,000 own-root roses to customers in Canada, Germany, Austria, Italy, Belgium, and other countries. Born on November 2, 1960 in Belgrade, Serbia, Radoslav has always loved roses but has devoted his life to them since the age of 34. Photographing roses and creating new moments in his garden are two of his passions. The progressive and melodic rock of his youth as well as classical music are also an integral part of his life. Radoslav, who is married and has two daughters, is hoping to create a beautiful new rose one day.

